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Leadership and Change Management

Leadership development through crises:

Analyzing the role of different crisis experiences in enhancing leadership skills

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Abstract

This thesis explores how personal and professional crises shape leadership skill development, addressing a critical gap in leadership research. Understanding how crises influence leadership can provide valuable insights into effective crisis management and human-centered leadership. Using 28 qualitative interviews with leaders across diverse industries and geographies, the study examines skill development across four dimensions: intrapersonal, interpersonal, management, and enterprise development. The findings reveal that professional crises, primarily enhance management and enterprise development skills, while personal crises, on the other hand, often lead leaders to deepen their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. This research underscores the importance of further integrating interpersonal and intrapersonal skills into leadership training, preparing leaders for modern challenges.

Keywords

Leadership Development, Crisis Management, Leadership Skills, Personal Crises, Professional Crises, Organizational Crises, Soft Skills, Skill Development, Crisis Leadership

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Definition and Objectives

Leadership plays a pivotal role in times of crisis, often determining whether an organization, a community, or even a nation can navigate uncertainty successfully. Recent global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical upheavals, including the war in Ukraine, have underscored the demand for agile, decisive, and empathetic leadership to manage complex challenges (Li et al. 2024; Tourish 2020). These events not only strain systems but also reveal the critical importance of effective crisis leadership. Leadership failures, such as during the flooding in Valencia, Spain, in November 2024, highlight the consequences of crisis management that lacks empathy, value-based decision making, and authenticity. In this case, leaders prioritized procedural responses over human-centered solutions, leading to a breakdown of trust, delayed recovery, and heightened public frustration (Le Monde 2024). This example underscores that effective leadership during crises not only requires quick and intelligent decisions but also demands a human-centric approach grounded in empathy and authenticity. Crises are uniquely transformative experiences that challenge leaders to adapt and grow in ways that routine circumstances do not. Faced with high-pressure environments, limited resources, and the need for swift decision making, leaders are often forced to develop new competencies and skills to navigate uncertainty effectively (Folkman and Lazarus 1984). The literature on leadership development during crises explores the skills leaders acquire through professional crises, such as organizational disruptions or external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Tourish 2020; Li et al. 2024). Similarly, personal crises, including illness or grief, foster emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and resilience (Park 2010; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). However, these perspectives often remain siloed, leaving a gap in understanding how personal crises influence leadership skills in professional contexts. While some research addresses personal crises, it often focuses on general personal growth rather than specific leadership

capabilities (Hickman and Creighton-Zollar 1997). Furthermore, studies rarely compare or integrate these skills with those developed during professional crises. This interplay between personal and professional realms highlights the need to explore both crisis types comprehensively. Understanding how these crises influence leaders' emotional resilience and decision making is crucial for identifying their distinct and shared contributions to leadership development.

This gap presents an opportunity to explore how personal and professional crises contribute to leadership development, particularly in areas such as decision making, team management, and emotional regulation. This thesis seeks to address this gap by answering the following research questions:

- What are the skills a leader develops during a professional crisis?
- What are the skills a leader develops during a personal crisis?
- What are the key similarities and differences in the leadership skills developed during personal and professional crises?

By examining these questions, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how crises—both personal and professional—serve as catalysts for leadership development. This research advances the field of crisis leadership by bridging personal and professional dimensions, offering practical and theoretical insights for leaders navigating today's volatile world.

1.2 Course of the Investigation

To structure this thesis clearly it is divided into five main parts: The first part, the theoretical background, provides the theoretical foundation by defining key concepts of leadership, skills, and crisis. It categorizes crises into professional and personal contexts and explores leadership skills, with a focus on soft skills. This chapter highlights the significance of soft skills in leadership development and investigates how these skills are shaped by crisis experiences.

Using Zenger and Folkman's (2014) framework, this chapter identifies the core leadership skills of exceptional leaders before applying Van Wart and Kapucu's (2011) framework to analyze skill development during professional crises and extend the discussion to personal crises. This theoretical background sets the stage for understanding crises as catalysts for leadership development. The second part outlines the methodology employed to collect and analyze data. Following a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1976), the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) was used to systematically organize and interpret qualitative data. Primary data collection consisted of 28 interviews with leaders, coaches, and one psychologist from diverse sectors. Together, these interviews provide a robust basis for examining leadership development during both personal and professional crises. The third part presents the results, developing a comparative framework that highlights similarities and differences in skill development between personal and professional crises. The discussion chapter, the fourth part, critically examines how these findings align with and expand upon existing theories, exploring practical implications for organizations and leaders, while identifying potential areas of focus for future research. Finally, the thesis concludes by synthesizing the key contributions of the research and summarizing its overarching insights.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Definition and Concepts

2.1.1 Crisis Definition

Crises involve low-probability, high-impact events that challenge an organization's ability to respond effectively, creating significant consequences that demand immediate attention (Schulberg 1974). These events are characterized by ambiguity, urgency, and high stakes, often resulting in substantial disruptions to organizations and their stakeholders (Hadley et al. 2011). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the profound impacts of such crises, causing uncertainty, economic damage, and threats to personal wellbeing (McKee and Stuckler 2020).

Crisis management encompasses systematic processes to address unexpected and disruptive events, including problem sensing, decision making, resource mobilization, and stakeholder engagement (Darling 1994; Jankelová and Mišún 2021). Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) five-stage framework—signal detection, preparation, containment, recovery, and learning—offers a structured approach to crisis management, emphasizing both response and proactive strategies. While **professional crises** often disrupt organizational operations, **personal crises** are deeply individual challenges that impact mental and emotional wellbeing (“Crisis” 2024). These include health issues, family-related difficulties, or significant personal losses, often leading to overwhelming stress and shifts in personal identity (Umphrey and Swiatkowski 2021). Despite their seemingly private nature, personal crises can profoundly influence leadership styles, decision making, and resilience (Bennis and Thomas 2002).

This thesis focuses on professional and personal crises to understand their combined impact on leadership development. Professional crises pertain to organizational disruptions affecting individuals' roles, while personal crises involve deeply personal challenges such as health or family issues that also influence professional contexts. By examining these crises, this research provides a nuanced perspective on how leaders navigate uncertainty and develop crucial skills in response to diverse challenges.

2.1.2 Skill Definition

Skills are defined as the practical application of knowledge to perform tasks. They encompass technical and behavioral attributes (Noe 2020; “EUCEN Glossary of University Lifelong Learning Terms” 2008). Skills differ from competencies, as competencies represent a broader combination of knowledge, behavior, and attitudes supporting task execution. For simplicity, this thesis uses “skills” and “competencies” interchangeably, recognizing their interdependence.

Hard skills, also known as technical skills, are measurable and task-specific and are often acquired through formal education or technical training. Conversely, **soft skills** include interpersonal and adaptability traits critical for navigating complex environments and fostering effective leadership in crisis contexts (Heckman and Kautz 2012; Deming 2017). These skills enhance communication, resilience, and critical thinking, enabling leaders to respond effectively to both professional and personal crises (Cimatti 2016). Cinque's (2016) cluster of soft skills—people-related, conceptual, personal, business-related, and community-related—illustrate their diverse applications. Soft skills are emphasized in this thesis due to their role in shaping leadership effectiveness, particularly in uncertain and high-pressure environments.

2.1.3 Leadership Definition

Leadership involves the interaction between a manager or leader and their subordinates. This relationship aims to ensure the effective completion of tasks and, in turn, the achievement of key organizational objectives that the leader helps to establish. Therefore, it involves providing direction and motivation to subordinates, guiding them toward a common goal (Muczyk and Holt 2008). However, it is crucial to distinguish between the concept of leadership and the specific actions that leaders take, often referred to as “enablers” or “competencies” of effective leadership.

Leadership competencies are the knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable individuals to effectively perform specific tasks (Ulrich, Zenger, and Smallwood 1999). Effective leadership requires a diverse set of skills that help leaders navigate complex environments and drive organizational success. Although the literature provides multiple leadership competency frameworks, Zenger and Folkman's *Extraordinary Leader Framework* (2014) offers a comprehensive, evidence-based approach underscoring critical competencies that differentiate effective leaders. Zenger and Folkman (2014) developed five

main competencies characterizing an extraordinary leader: character, personal capability, focus on results, interpersonal skills, and leading organizational change.

Character emphasizes a leader’s integrity, honesty, and ethical behavior. These are fundamental traits that form the foundation of trust and reliability in leadership. Leaders who exhibit strong character are seen as credible and dependable by their followers. **Personal capability** refers to the leader’s technical expertise, problem-solving abilities, and intellectual capacity. This component highlights the importance of continuous learning, adaptability, and innovation capabilities, ensuring that leaders can meet the demands of their roles effectively. Furthermore, leaders must set clear goals, drive and initiate performance, and hold themselves and others accountable. Leaders must deliver and **focus on results** and tangible outcomes while maintaining high standards of excellence. **Interpersonal skills**, which include clear communication, building relationships, inspiring and motivating others, and fostering teamwork, create a collaborative environment where employees feel valued and engaged. Finally, Zenger and Folkman’s (2014) model stresses the importance of **leading organizational change**. This component focuses on a leader’s ability to develop a strategic vision and perspective, manage transitions, and guide their organization through periods of change and innovation. Leaders must be capable of managing uncertainty, and willing to challenge the status quo (see Figure 1).

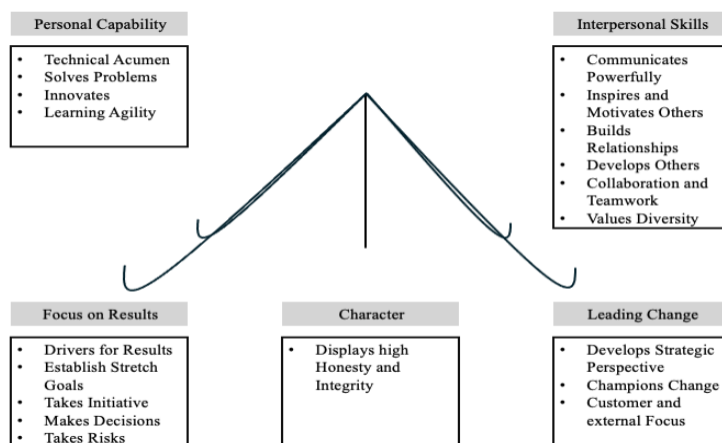


Figure 1. The extraordinary leader framework (Zenger and Folkman 2014)

2.2 Leadership Skill Development through Crises

It is crucial for leaders to draw upon their experiences when making decisions during crises. Past experiences often form the foundation of intuitive or emotionally driven decision making (Sayegh, Anthony, and Perrewé 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that relying on past experiences can be deceptive, as lessons learned previously may not always be applicable to new and evolving situations (Förster et al. 2022; Reeves, Whitaker, and Strack 2020). Consequently, leaders must recognize that crises often present paradoxes that require a combination of both rational analysis and intuitive judgment. Maintaining an open and flexible mindset is key. Therefore, balancing spontaneous, adaptive actions with informed, well-considered decisions is important to effectively navigate adversity (Best and Gooderham 2015; Tabesh and Vera 2020).

2.2.1 Skill Development through Professional Crises

Crisis leadership demands a unique set of skills that go beyond those required for everyday operations. In times of crisis, managers are tasked with making critical decisions quickly, often without having access to complete or accurate information. Therefore, crisis leadership refers to the strategic responsibilities that span all phases of crisis management, from preparation to response and recovery (Boin et al. 2005).

Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) highlight three core responsibilities, each supported by distinct skills that are required for effective management in high-stakes scenarios. First, leaders must exhibit **calm but strong leadership**, maintaining composure and projecting confidence to reduce panic and provide clear direction. Calm but strong leadership involves skill such as resilience, motivational ability, effective communication, and collaboration with political and organizational stakeholders to manage scarce resources and deliver decisive actions. Second, leaders must engage in **pragmatic decision making** under constraints. Crises demand rapid analysis and flexibility as situations evolve. Leaders must act decisively, delegate effectively,

and adapt strategies to navigate the limitations of time and resources. Finally, leaders must ensure **coordination and reorganization** in chaotic environments. This includes planning operations, engaging teams despite exhaustion, and forging partnerships to secure external resources. Social skills and networking are critical for expanding collaborations under extreme pressure (see Table 1).

Table 1. Skill development through professional crises (Van Wart and Kapucu 2011, 508)

Crisis Demands	Perceived competency needs
Need for calm but strong leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-confidence • Willingness to assume responsibility • Motivating • Articulating vision and mission • Resilience • Communication skills
Need for pragmatic decision making under severe time and resource constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision making • Analytic skills • Decisiveness • Flexibility • Delegating
Need for coordination and (re)organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operations planning • Team building • Networking and partnering • Social skills

However, despite the importance of crisis leadership, these skills are often absent from standard professional training. Since crises are low-probability and high-consequence events, leaders have limited chances to rely on past experiences to cultivate crisis leadership skills.

2.2.2 Skill Development through Personal Crises

Personal crises offer significant opportunities for **personal growth and reflection**. They often heighten awareness of life's fragility, encouraging individuals to confront their mortality and reassess how they **allocate their time and resources** (Yalom 1980). This realization prompts a **reevaluation of values, priorities, and goals**, enabling individuals to focus on what they find truly meaningful (Park 2010). Crises can serve as a catalyst for letting go of outdated commitments and embracing new, purposeful directions in life, fostering a "carpe diem" mindset (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 2015).

These experiences also foster deeper **self-awareness** by revealing individual strengths and limitations. Personal crises push individuals to explore their **emotional resilience** and adaptability, teaching them to navigate uncertainty and regulate their emotions under stress (Folkman and Lazarus 1984). At the same time, these experiences deepen **empathy and understanding for others**, particularly those in vulnerable situations. This heightened sensitivity strengthens interpersonal relationships, promoting trust and compassion (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996).

Additionally, personal crises provide valuable insights into the **reliability of support systems**. They encourage individuals to reflect on the sources of their strength—be it personal relationships, values, or spiritual beliefs—and assess their stability (Pargament 1997). Such reflections may reveal surprising areas of strength or expose weaknesses, guiding individuals to strengthen their foundations. These moments of vulnerability also foster a sense of agency and self-efficacy, as individuals gain **confidence** in their ability to manage challenges and advocate for meaningful change in their lives (Folkman and Lazarus 1984).

Finally, personal crises offer a unique lens through which individuals can observe societal behaviors, values, and systemic vulnerabilities. They provide an opportunity to reflect on broader social dynamics, prompting individuals to **question societal norms** and consider how these align with their personal beliefs (Park 2010). Taken together, personal crises provide a transformative space for growth, allowing individuals to emerge with greater resilience, clarity, and purpose while fostering a deeper connection to both themselves and the world around them.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore how crises influence leadership skill development, this chapter outlines the methodological approach used in the study. It begins by detailing the qualitative research design and philosophical foundations, followed by an explanation of the sampling strategy used to select diverse interviewees. The

chapter then describes the data collection process, including the structure and conduct of interviews, and concludes with an overview of the data analysis methods, highlighting the development of a new theoretical framework.

3.1 Research Design

To address the research question, I employed an **exploratory qualitative research** approach to systematically analyze dynamic processes and gain a holistic understanding of how professional and personal crises influence leadership skills. To better understand and analyze patterns and comprehend context-specific factors, I used **qualitative** data.

Rooted in relativism, my thesis assumes that no universal truth exists but rather that multiple realities are shaped by individual experiences (Smith 2008). This assumption aligns with the philosophy of social constructivism, which guided my exploration of diverse perspectives on leadership, crisis management, and skill development (Berger and Luckmann 2011). The inductive **Gioia method** supported surfacing new concepts and structuring data analysis, ensuring a balance between emergent insights and existing theory. By continually analyzing and comparing the collected data, I identified differences and recurring patterns that helped me understand the research context and background, ultimately uncovering the theory embedded within the data (Glaser and Strauss 1976).

3.2 Sampling

I began with secondary research to establish a foundation for understanding leadership in crisis contexts. Subsequently, I conducted 15 interviews, complemented by 13 additional interviews conducted by Youssef Rekik, who followed the same interview guide. A combination of **typical and snowball sampling** ensured the purposeful selection of information-rich cases.

My sample included leaders from three countries, representing organizations of varying sizes—from small businesses to global corporations. Additionally, I interviewed one psychologist and four leadership coaches to incorporate their unique perspectives on personal crises and how

they can shape leadership behaviors. Further information on the interviewee's position, industry, and company size can be found in **Appendix 1**. This diverse sampling enhanced the breadth and depth of insights gathered. All interviewees were contacted via phone or e-mail.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected using a combination of **standardized questions and a semi-structured interview guide**. My interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, with 12 in German and 3 in English. Each interview lasted between 30 and 55 minutes. Participants received the questions at least 3 days in advance to allow preparation. At the beginning of each interview, I explained the confidentiality agreement, obtained consent for recording, and clarified the time available to tailor the session accordingly. To avoid influencing responses, I briefly outlined the research question and provided a definition of professional and personal crisis. The interviews were divided into four sections: leadership background, professional crisis experience and skill development, personal crisis experience and skill development, and a potential correlation of skill development. The corresponding interview guide can be found in **Appendix 2**. For coaches, I also explored their observations of how crises impacted their clients' leadership abilities. I started conducting the interviews on the 4th October and finished my last interview on the 30th October.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and translated with the assistance of ChatGPT, followed by manual verification to ensure accuracy. My approach of translating my transcripts from German to English can be found in **Appendix 3**.

MAXQDA facilitated the organization and analysis of **454 codes**, which informed the development of a new theoretical framework. By systematically comparing data with existing theories, I identified unique contributions of crisis experiences to the development of leadership skills. Using **grounded theory**, I analyzed the data iteratively, highlighting important quotes,

which I clustered into first-order concepts. By constantly comparing my first-order concepts with Zenger and Folkman's *Extraordinary Leader Framework* (2014) and Van Wart and Kapucu's (2011) framework, I developed my second-order concepts and finally defined my own four aggregate dimensions: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, management skills, and enterprise development skills. To visualize my methodology, I built a Gioia tree representing my 4 dimensions, as well as the concepts and quotes selected from all interview transcripts which can be found in **Appendix 4**. Additionally, I attached the Excel file to my final report to guarantee readability. These dimensions were used to compare skill development in personal and professional crises, while acknowledging that some dimensions were more prominent depending on the crisis context.

4 Findings

This chapter examines the skills developed during professional and personal crises and their impacts on leaders, organizations, and teams.

4.1 Skill Development through Professional Crises

4.1.1 Intrapersonal Skills

Professional crises offer leaders the opportunity to develop **intrapersonal skills** such as emotional and psychological resilience. **Resilience** is a skill that evolves through the experience of managing crises and stems from a leader's **self-confidence** in their ability to handle unforeseen challenges, as V9I explained: "Having experienced it [professional crisis] early on also gave me the confidence that I can manage such things." Leaders who face multiple crises build trust in their capabilities, which allows them to approach future challenges with greater assurance, as interviewee V2B highlighted: "I have the advantage of knowing that I can overcome crises. If you will, the 'ultimate crisis' made me crisis-proof." This **self-confidence** strengthens leaders' capacity to remain steady under pressure: "There will always be surprises, but if you've managed multiple crises at once, you realize you can handle almost

anything” (V13M). This realization provides leaders with a sense of control, empowering them to make thoughtful decisions and guide their teams through uncertainty.

Furthermore, **self-awareness** allows leaders to regulate their own emotions by the reflective process of navigating crises, which pushes them to examine their own behaviors and reactions, as V7G explained further: “One of the hardest tasks is to look within yourself for the cause rather than blaming others.” Interviewee V3C further elaborated, saying: “Emotional intelligence includes self-awareness. If you don’t know yourself, it’s hard to adapt to others.”

Additionally, **managing stress and calmness** influence the team’s ability to remain focused and productive, as leaders who approach crises with steadiness can continue making quick and smart decisions, pushing an organization through a highly impacted situation. One leader highlighted this, stating: “When in a highly stressful situation, there’s a risk of making hasty decisions that might backfire” (V7G). Interviewee Y9J added that he not only had to manage stress for himself but “for the entire team.” Therefore, the ability to maintain composure under pressure ensures that leaders can assess situations objectively and avoid making hasty decisions. The development of emotional and psychological resilience transforms leaders into more composed and confident individuals. These skills enable leaders to provide stability and direction for their teams, ensuring they can navigate uncertainty effectively.

4.1.2 Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills are fundamental skills leaders develop during professional crises. By **communicating openly and transparently**, leaders build trust and reassure their teams by being honest and reliable, as interviewee V3C explained: “As a manager, you need to adjust by listening, empathizing, and understanding employees’ individual situations. You learn when to speak, when to stay quiet, and when to boost morale.” By being “clear and anticipat[ing]” (V6F) challenges and expectations, leaders help their teams align with shared goals and reduce anxiety. Therefore, **empathy** further strengthens communication during

crises, as outlined by interviewee V5E, who expressed the importance of asking employees “how things are really going” and showing genuine interest in their emotions and wellbeing during professional crises: “One of the lessons Covid taught us is to take a moment to ask. To say, ‘Tell me, how are things really going?’” (V5E). Showing empathy is particularly important during high-stakes situations, as emotionally supported teams that are “being treated as humans” (V4D) are more likely to remain engaged and collaborative. Additionally, demonstrating **active presence and engagement** is critical: “When things are going badly, those affected want those responsible to show up personally” (V10J). By being physically present, leaders signal their commitment to addressing the crisis alongside their teams, reinforcing trust and solidarity.

4.1.3 Management Skills

Time management emerges as a vital skill, as leaders are often required to act quickly while balancing competing priorities. As tasks during crises demand “an intense focus on action” they require leaders to “start doing things extremely quickly” (V9I). This requires leaders to allocate time effectively, ensuring urgent matters are addressed without neglecting strategic objectives. Additionally, **delegation** becomes essential during professional crises, as tasks can become more urgent, and timelines become shorter. Leaders develop the ability to entrust responsibilities to team members, giving them the authority to make decisions themselves, enabling leaders to focus on higher-level decisions. Reflecting on this skill, interviewee V1A shared that she should “have met with my leadership team at the program’s start [beginning of her professional crisis] and asked for their [her employees’] support by delegating more responsibilities.”

Furthermore, **scenario planning** allows leaders to anticipate multiple potential outcomes and prepare for various contingencies. Assessing “the situation with a 360-degree view and planning multiple ways to resolve it allowed for better decision making” (V6F). This

assessment and scenario planning enhance quicker responses to changing circumstances and ensure that decisions align with organizational goals.

Moreover, most leaders mentioned developing **critical thinking**, which enables them to analyze complex challenges objectively and devise solutions that address root causes. Interviewee V13M outlined this by explaining, “When I’m faced with a crisis (..), I tend to shift into a survival mode. I become calm, structured, and extremely objective.” This disciplined approach ensures that leaders make well-reasoned decisions, even in high-pressure situations. Finally, **adaptability** emerges as a critical skill that leaders refine during professional crises, enabling them to navigate rapidly changing circumstances with agility and foresight. As one leader remarked, “Darwin said that survival depends on adaptability, and leaders must be adaptable like a chameleon, able to change with the environment” (Y7H).

4.1.4 Enterprise Development Skills

Empowering employees is a skill that encompasses “the broad distribution of responsibility and authority within the organization” (V5E). This authority gives employees a sense of ownership, as further outlined by interviewee Y9J: “I had to ensure the team stayed motivated and productive. This experience reinforced the importance of managing human resources effectively, ensuring that everyone felt supported and aligned with our goals” (Y9J). As mentioned, leaders are often forced to operate under intense scrutiny, which requires them to act in alignment with their **core values and principles**. Interviewee V9I further highlighted this by stating, “I believe I was most authentic during these crises because you have no time to think about how you come across. You just try to do the right thing in this role” (V9I). Furthermore, “the importance of building a strong leadership team” and **selecting the right people** “to share responsibilities” (Y3C) becomes a key focus and skill during crises, as leaders must rely on their teams to manage tasks and maintain momentum. This involves identifying individuals who can be trusted and perform effectively under pressure. Finally, **driving change**

and innovation is an essential skill, as crises often require creative solutions and new approaches to longstanding challenges. Interviewee V12L elaborated on this by explaining that “crises help reduce the fear of change or create a level of necessity for change that pushes aside the typical concerns one might have about change” (V12L).

4.2 Skill Development through Personal Crises

4.2.1 Intrapersonal Skills

Personal crises play a transformative role in shaping leaders’ emotional and psychological resilience, equipping them with the skills to navigate adversity and uncertainty effectively.

Resilience develops as leaders learn that setbacks can be overcome, and that growth often follows hardship. This resilience is not an isolated skill but is closely tied to **self-confidence**, as overcoming personal crises reinforces the belief in one’s ability to face future challenges with steadiness and assurance. This **confidence** stems from surviving challenging times and realizing their own strength, as highlighted by one interviewee who stated they learned to trust “themselves, mentally and physically” (V1A). Another leader emphasized the lasting impact of these experiences, sharing, “When crises arise today [professional and personal], they don’t shake me as much as they would have 20 or 30 years ago” (V7G). V6F explained how this has helped her in a professional setting: “Personal experiences teach resilience, which is crucial. During COVID, information changed daily, much like health updates during an illness. Personal resilience helped me manage the constant uncertainty.”

Moreover, **self-awareness** emerges as another essential skill developed through personal crises as “the more you understand yourself, the better you can handle life’s challenges” (Y8I). This skill allows leaders to recognize their own strengths, limitations, and emotional triggers, enabling them to respond to crises with greater composure and intentionality. By understanding their personal values and leadership style, leaders can better align their decisions with their core principles, fostering authenticity and trust among their teams. Building on this foundation of

resilience and self-awareness, **self-compassion** emerges as another vital skill. Confronting profound difficulties compels leaders to confront their own vulnerabilities and embrace a more compassionate attitude toward themselves. As one leader reflected, they learned “to be kinder to oneself” (V4D) during such times, enabling them to process emotions, recover more effectively, and ultimately grow stronger. This practice of self-compassion not only improves leaders’ wellbeing but also serves as a model for their teams, fostering a culture of understanding, empathy, and support.

Personal crises also prompt leaders **to reevaluate their priorities and values**, as interviewee V4D further explained: “I always put work first, and this was kind of the first time in my life (...) that I’ve really put myself before work, which has been an amazing transition” (V4D). These moments of reflection often result in a realignment of goals and commitments as leaders take stock of what truly matters. Another interviewee highlighted the importance of setting boundaries, stating: “Often, the common issues are feeling torn between family and work or not having clear priorities at work. For many, it’s about giving themselves ‘permission’ to prioritize and set boundaries” (V15O). This ability to reassess and prioritize ensures that leaders maintain focus on what is most meaningful, allowing them to make decisions that align with their core values. Finally, personal crises develop leaders’ ability to **manage stress and remain calm** under pressure and uncertainty: “Once you’ve tolerated something very difficult or traumatic, your tolerance for stress or frustration or anger just goes up,” explained interviewee V4D. The day-to-day stressors that previously felt overwhelming often seem far less significant, and one “starts taking everyday issues much more calmly” (V13M). This sense of calmness extends beyond individual wellbeing, as leaders who remain composed under stress serve as a stabilizing force for their teams. The interconnectedness of these skills—resilience, self-confidence, self-compassion, reevaluating priorities, and calmness—underscores how personal crises reshape a leader’s perspective and approach to life. Together,

these skills enable leaders to navigate both personal and professional complexities with clarity, confidence, and grace.

4.2.2 Interpersonal Skills

Navigating a personal crisis often requires leaders to be **open** about their vulnerabilities and circumstances, fostering an environment of authenticity and trust in a team. One leader explained, “The most important takeaway for me is the importance of open communication and explaining any absence, making sure colleagues understand the reasons if you need to take time off for personal reasons” (V8H). This level of **transparency** not only helps manage expectations but also strengthens relationships, as team members and peers are more likely to offer support when they understand the situation. Through these experiences, leaders learn to **communicate** more honestly, building a foundation of mutual trust and respect. Additionally, experiencing a personal crisis enhances a leader’s ability to **empathize with others**. The emotional intensity of such situations cultivates a deeper understanding of the struggles that individuals face, allowing leaders to connect with their teams on a more personal level. Interviewee V12L explained that “this increased her sensitivity toward employees who invest in family and might make career compromises as a result.” Moreover, a personal crisis underscores the importance of being **physically present and emotionally engaging** for others. Leaders who have experienced personal challenges often recognize that words alone are insufficient to demonstrate care and commitment. As one interviewee shared, “It led me to be more mindful with myself, which I extended to my leadership style, asking employees, ‘How are you, really?’” (V1A). By showing up consistently and offering genuine interest, leaders reinforce their commitment to their colleagues and loved ones, strengthening bonds and enhancing collaboration.

4.2.3 Management Skills

As mentioned, leaders going through personal crises often redefine how they **allocate their time**, placing a greater emphasis on their wellbeing and personal priorities. This shift leads to stricter boundaries between personal and professional commitments, forcing them to focus their time and energy on the most critical tasks. One participant explained, “I’m very strict about when I go to bed, when I finish work, and how long I take meetings. My meetings are shorter. They’re more effective” (V4D). By reducing the time available for work and concentrating on essentials, leaders learn to operate with greater efficiency, ensuring that they remain effective without compromising their personal wellbeing. The need to prioritize personal wellbeing during a crisis often limits a leader’s capacity to handle all responsibilities, making **delegation** an indispensable skill. One leader shared, “I would prioritize only what I needed to do, and I would make sure the team did the rest and really delegate” (V4D). Through delegation, leaders ensure that critical tasks are completed effectively, even when their availability is limited. Personal crises instill a **stepwise approach** to problem solving, as these experiences often unfold unpredictably. Leaders learn to focus on immediate challenges rather than becoming overwhelmed by the larger picture. One interviewee described this process concisely: “In those moments, you don’t think about the entire journey; you think about the next step” (V2B). By breaking down complex challenges into manageable steps, leaders develop the ability to navigate crises with clarity and confidence, guiding themselves and their teams toward practical and achievable solutions.

4.2.4 Enterprise Development Skills

Through personal crises, leaders develop the skill of **empowering and enabling their teams** to take ownership and initiative. Rather than micromanaging, they learn to trust their team members’ capabilities, creating an environment where individuals feel empowered to contribute meaningfully. As one leader explained, “This method of enabling people to move

forward is something I learned through personal crisis. (...) You just need to enable them to take those steps” (V2B). By cultivating confidence within their teams, leaders create an environment that encourages collaboration and problem solving. Additionally, leaders **sharpen their core values and principals**, fostering a more authentic and value-based approach to leadership. These experiences shift a leader’s focus toward making decisions that are deeply rooted in principles and genuine care for others, rather than being driven solely by professional demands or external expectations. One interviewee shared, “I felt like it was very helpful for my team to know what I was going through because I wasn’t showing up as my normal kind of strong, very put-together self. I really wanted to be vulnerable” (V6F). Through vulnerability and openness, leaders not only model authenticity but also demonstrate that leadership is about human connection and shared values.

Figure 3 illustrates the skills developed during professional and personal crises, emphasizing those uniquely cultivated in specific crisis scenarios. These differences are further explored in the discussion chapter, where they are compared with existing literature.

Leadership Skill Development through Crises			
	Overlapping Skills	Skills unique to Professional Crises	Skills unique to Personal Crises
Intrapersonal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resilience and self-confidence • Self-awareness • Stress management and calmness 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-compassion • Reevaluating priorities and values
Interpersonal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open and transparent communication • Empathy • Active presence and engagement 		
Management Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • Delegation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenario planning • Critical thinking • Adaptability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stepwise problem-solving
Enterprise Development Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering employees • Sharpen core values and principals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selecting the right people • Driving change and innovation 	

Figure 2. Leadership skill development through crises

5 Discussion

This research contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating how both personal and professional crises cultivate distinct yet complementary skill sets, leading to more holistic leadership development. While existing literature often addresses these crisis types separately, this study reveals their interconnectedness and synergistic impact on leadership skill development across four key dimensions: intrapersonal, interpersonal, management, and enterprise development. This chapter discusses these findings in detail, highlighting their alignment with existing theories, their unique contributions, and their practical implications for leadership training and organizational practices.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Both professional and personal crises foster **intrapersonal skills**. In professional contexts, leaders develop resilience through navigating high-pressure situations and achieving successful outcomes, building confidence in their ability to handle unforeseen challenges. This finding aligns with existing literature on crisis leadership, which emphasizes the importance of operational resilience and the need for pragmatic decision making under extreme resource constraints (Van Wart and Kapucu 2011). Personal crises, however, cultivate a deeper form of resilience, encompassing self-compassion, the ability to re-evaluate priorities and values, and a greater capacity for emotional regulation. While existing literature acknowledges post-traumatic growth, suggesting a positive personal growth of individuals following traumatic events (Yalom 1980; Park 2010; Folkman and Lazarus 1984; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996), this research uniquely explores how these intrapersonal skills, such as self-compassion and emotional regulation, can be leveraged in leadership contexts. This finding highlights the potential for personal crises to contribute to the development of more emotionally intelligent, self-aware and empathetic leaders.

Both types of crises enhance **interpersonal skills**. Professional crises underline open and transparent communication, emphasizing clarity and alignment to maintain team cohesion during challenging times, which aligns with existing literature on crisis communication (Boin et al. 2005; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996; Coombs 2007; Van Wart and Kapucu 2011). Personal crises foster open, transparent and authentic communication, characterized by vulnerability and emotional sharing, which strengthens leader–follower relationships and builds trust. This finding resonates with research on relational leadership, which highlights the importance of genuine connection and empathy (Uhl-Bien 2006; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). This research suggests that personal crises contribute to a more relational and authentic leadership style, going beyond the transactional communication often emphasized in traditional leadership models (Zenger and Folkman 2014).

In terms of **management skills**, professional crises emphasize strategic management, requiring leaders to master time management, delegation, scenario planning, critical thinking, and adaptability. This finding aligns with crisis management literature, which emphasizes the importance of strategic thinking and flexibility (Boin et al. 2005; Zenger and Folkman 2014). Personal crises, while not explicitly focusing on these specific skills, indirectly contribute to improved management by fostering a more holistic approach to problem solving. Leaders learn to prioritize wellbeing, set boundaries, and approach challenges in a more stepwise and manageable manner. This research suggests that personal experiences can cultivate problem-solving and decision-making skills that are transferable to leadership contexts, even if they are not directly related to traditional management training.

Professional crises drive **enterprise development skills**, such as empowering employees, making authentic and value-based decisions, and driving change and innovation. This finding aligns with literature on extraordinary leadership skills, organizational change and innovation (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996; Zenger and Folkman 2014). Personal crises, while not directly

focusing on these specific skills, contribute to a more authentic and value-based leadership style. By prompting a re-evaluation of values and priorities, personal crises can lead to more ethical and principled leadership decisions. This research suggests that personal experiences can cultivate a deeper sense of purpose and values, which can translate into more ethical and responsible leadership practices.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for leadership development. A recurring theme among interviewees was the lack of formal leadership training not only for professional- but also personal crises. Many leaders learned skills “on the go,” finding existing programs insufficient. Future training must address **intrapersonal skills** such as self-awareness, resilience, and stress management, alongside **interpersonal skills** such as empathy and proactive and authentic communication. Interviewees have shared personal practices that have been helpful for the development process, for example journaling, yoga, therapy, and coaching. Given the significant impact of personal crises on leadership development, leadership development programs should therefore not only focus on traditional management and enterprise development skills. Additionally, organizations should also **emphasize core values** as a guiding framework during crises. Ensuring alignment with organizational values prevents ethical lapses and strengthens stakeholder trust. In summary, leadership training must evolve to include a broader range of skills and emphasize value-driven approaches, ensuring leaders are well-prepared for personal and professional crises and enabling them to navigate both professional and personal challenges with greater resilience and effectiveness.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis provides significant insights into the skills leaders develop through personal and professional crises, but it also has limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, while the study included leaders from diverse geographic regions and a

range of organizational contexts, the sample size of 28 is relatively small. Future research could increase the sample size and focus on specific sectors or regions to examine variations in development. Second, interviewees exhibited varying levels of self-reflection and openness. While most leaders could articulate the skills they developed through crises, some were less introspective or hesitant to discuss their personal experiences. One leader reported falling into burnout and depression during a personal crisis, contrasting with the general theme of positive skill development. Future studies could explore the conditions under which crises lead to growth versus those that result in negative outcomes. Lastly, the study's retrospective design introduces potential recall bias. Reflecting on past experiences may have led to an overemphasis on positive outcomes or the omission of certain challenges. A longitudinal study tracking leaders during and after crises as well as their employees would provide more objective and dynamic insights into how skills evolve over time and how effectively they are used.

6 Conclusion

This thesis examines how leaders develop skills through personal and professional crises, structured into four dimensions: **intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, management skills, and enterprise development skills**. Based on 28 qualitative interviews with leaders and coaches from diverse geographies and industries, the study highlights the transformative role crises play in shaping leadership skills. This thesis' primary contribution lies in its nuanced framework, which compares and distinguishes the skills developed through personal and professional crises while underscoring their shared importance in leadership development. My findings underline both personal and professional crises contribute to shaping holistic leadership capabilities. Leaders emerge with a blend of human-centered and operationally resilient skills, demonstrating that crises—despite their challenges—offer valuable opportunities for growth. Crucially, this study reveals that both personal and professional crises

contribute to all four skill dimensions—intrapersonal, interpersonal, management, and enterprise development—albeit to varying degrees.

The findings reveal that professional crises, primarily enhance management and enterprise development skills, sharpening leaders' ability to make decisive and informed decisions under pressure. Leaders develop confidence in their crisis management capabilities and learn to balance strategic clarity with compassion for their teams during uncertain times. Additionally, these crises emphasize adaptability, critical thinking, and innovation, skills crucial for navigating complex organizational challenges.

Personal crises, on the other hand, often lead leaders to deepen their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. By reassessing their values and priorities, leaders gain greater self-awareness and confidence, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of others. These crises instill resilience and self-compassion, enabling leaders to navigate uncertainty with emotional depth and authenticity.

Practically, the findings advocate for leadership training programs that extend beyond traditional management and enterprise development. Such programs should also address intrapersonal and interpersonal skills to create leaders who are not only strategically adept but also empathetic, resilient, and authentic. As crises become an inevitable part of today's volatile world, organizations must prepare leaders to face both professional challenges and personal adversities. This study underscores that exceptional leadership is forged not only in action but also in reflection, growth, and humanity.

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Appendixes

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Appendix 1: Interview Partner Sampling Information

Interview	Interview Date	Position	Department	Company Size	Employee Number of Company	Industry	Presence
Y1	n/a	Owner & Master Franchise Manager at BNI Portugal	C-level	Small	10+	Business Networking	International
Y2	n/a	Marketing Lead at GSM Electronics	Mid-level	Small	<50	Electronics Retail	International
Y3	n/a	CEO & Entrepreneur at Neotrade and FCR Auto	C-level	Small	<20	Consulting & Sports	International
Y4	n/a	Founder & Mentor at IEEE SMU	Self-employed	Small	<20	Technical Education	International
Y5	n/a	Founder at Catrina (Startup)	C-level	Small	30+	Deathcare Technology	National
Y6	n/a	Founder & CEO of Daisy in a Box	C-level	Small	50+	Social Entrepreneurship	National
Y7	n/a	CEO of BPCC (British-Portuguese Chamber of	C-level	Medium	100+	Trade & Commerce	National
Y8	n/a	HR Coordinator at SPT	Mid-level	Small	40	Landscape Architecture	International
Y9	n/a	CEO of Rezoli (B2B Events)	C-level	Small	15+	B2B Events	National
Y10	n/a	Founder & Medical Lead of Cosmetic Surgery Clinic	C-level	Small	<5	Cosmetic Surgery	International
Y11	n/a	CEO and Co-Founder of AlphaTech	C-level	Large	500+	Technology & Logistics	National
Y12	n/a	CEO of XYZ Import-Export Company	C-level	Large	200+	Import-Export	National
Y13	n/a	COO of a Hotel Chain in Morocco	C-level	Medium	Medium	Hospitality	International

Interview	Interview Date	Position	Department	Company Size	Employee Number of Company	Industry	Presence
V1	04. Oct	CEO of a real estate development company in Germany, ex partner at MBB consultancy	C-level	Small	<10	Real Estate	Local
V2	24. Oct	Co-host of a Podcast, best-selling author and Ex-Ceo of a company that went into insolvency in 2003	Self-employed, C-level	Small	n/a	Market Entry	National
V3	18. Oct	Executive Director Sales EMEA of an American financial services corporation in France	Mid-level	Large	40.000	Financial information	International
V4	09. Oct	CEO of undergraduate education program for the consulting industry in South-African	C-level	Small	<10	Education	Local
V5	15. Oct	Founder of academy for communicative leadership, coach for senior leaders, ex-board member of DAX30 company, lecturer for leadership at LMU in Germany	C-level	Large	150.000	Insurance and asset management	International
V6	27. Oct	CHRO for outsourcing and offshoring consultancy in France	C-level	Large	130.000	Consulting	International
V7	14. Oct	Ex-Ceo of jewelry company in Germany	C-level	SME	200	Jewelry	National
V8	13. Oct	Partner at Tier1 consulting company in Germany	C-level	Large	3.000	Consulting	International
V9	07. Oct	CFO central Europe and COO for EMESA for MBB consultancy in Germany	C-level	Large	32.000	Consulting	International
V10	07. Oct	Leadership Coach/Sparing partner for leadership development for entrepreneurs and family businesses or SMEs in Germany	Self-employed	Small	n/a	Coaching	National
V11	26. Oct	Psychologist with economic background focused on coaching and different therapies in Germany	Self-employed	n/a	n/a	Psychology	Local
V12	29. Oct	Ex-CEO of big american tech companies in Germany + ex-Ceo of MBB digital firm and coach in Germany	C-level, self-employed	Large	32.000	Tech	International
V13	28. Oct	CEO of big insurance company in Germany	C-level	Large	700	Insurance	National
V14	28. Oct	CEO of development company in Germany	C-level	Small	<10	Real Estate	Local
V15	30. Oct	CEO of small software company, professor focused on project management and leadership and coach for executives in Germany	Self-employed	Small	<10	Software	Local

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Interview Structure:

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. Personal Crisis Experience
4. Professional Crisis Experience
5. Connection between Personal and Professional Crises and Leadership Competence

1. Introduction:

1. Greeting and Rapport:

"Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I really appreciate your participation in this research. I'm excited to hear your insights on leadership and crisis management."

2. Purpose of the Interview:

"I am currently working on my master's thesis, which focuses on the **relationship between crisis experiences and leadership development. Specifically, I'm exploring how managers who have navigated personal and organizational crises—like the COVID-19 pandemic—develop unique leadership skills** that help them manage uncertainty and pressure in the future."

3. What the Interview Will Cover:

"Today, I'd like to ask you about your own experiences with crises, whether personal or professional, and how you believe those experiences have influenced your leadership skills. We'll discuss things like how you handled decision-making during a crisis, how your leadership evolved, and what key lessons you've learned."

4. Confidentiality and Consent:

"I want to reassure you that everything you share **will be confidential**, and your name and any identifying details will not be included in my final report. With your permission, I'd like to **record our conversation for note-taking purposes**, but the recording will only be used for my personal research. Do you consent to the recording?"

5. Structure of the Interview:

"The interview will take about 40 minutes. I'll start with a **few structured questions** to gather some consistent information across all participants, and **then we'll move into more open-ended questions** where you can share your thoughts and reflections."

6. Invitation to Start: "Before we begin, do you have any questions about the research or the interview process? If not, we can dive right into the questions."

2. Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role and leadership responsibilities?
2. How long have you been in a leadership position?
3. Have you had any formal leadership training? If yes, what kind?

3. Professional Crisis Experience

4. Could you describe a significant professional crisis that you encountered in your leadership role?
5. How do you think your leadership skills have developed after dealing with a professional crisis, and were there specific skills that you felt were particularly strengthened?
6. How did this crisis impact your organization or team?

4. Personal Crisis Experience

7. Have you also experienced a personal crisis (e.g., health issues, family crisis) that has influenced your leadership skills?
8. How do you think your leadership skills have developed after dealing with a personal crisis, and were there specific skills that you felt were particularly strengthened?
9. How did this crisis impact your organization or team?

5. Connection between Personal and Professional Crises and Leadership Competence

10. Which crisis has most shaped your ability to handle uncertainties?
11. Would you say that going through personal crises has made you more resilient as a leader in professional situations? If yes, how?

Appendix 3: German-English Translation Approach

Original Quote in German	Translation to English
<p>"Habe ich den Vorteil, dass ich weiß, dass ich Krisen meistern kann. Also wenn du so willst, die erlebte "Obermecker-Krise" hat mich krisenfest gemacht. Weil wenn ich jetzt höre, es verändert sich alles, dann denke ich mir, "Ja, stimmt. Aber ich werde damit umgehen." (V2B)</p>	<p>"I have the advantage of knowing that I can overcome crises. If you will, the "ultimate crisis" made me crisis-proof. So when I hear that everything is changing, I think, "Yes, that's true. But I will deal with it." (V2B)</p>
<p>"Das ist ja eine der schwierigsten Aufgaben in unserem Leben, wenn wir ein Problem haben, das Problem bei sich selber erst mal zu suchen." (V7G)</p>	<p>"One of the hardest tasks in life, when faced with a problem, is to look within yourself for the cause rather than blaming others." (V7G)</p>

Appendix 4: Gioia Tree

Please check the Excel file attached to this thesis for readability

